

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Can parents be friends with their children?

I've found there is a bittersweetness to watching my children get older. Although it's painful to know that I'll never rock them to sleep again or hear a cute, little voice singing, "Jesus loves me," that pain has been balanced by the blessings of the next stage of life. As my oldest is now in college, one of those blessings has been developing a relationship with her that is more friend and less disciplinarian. That prompted me to wonder, *Can parents be friends with their children?*

—Nicole Balza

"MY BESTIE IS better than the restie!"

"My bestest friend in the whole wide world!"

So boast moms across the United States in their social media as they pose with their daughters. Perhaps there is a harmless, cutesy intent to these posts meant to reflect the close relationship of mothers and their daughters. On the other hand, such posts beg an important question: Should there be a distinction in the family between parent and friend?

It's interesting to note that in the Bible *zero* passages talk about parents and children as friends. You will find plenty of passages about children needing to obey and honor and show respect. And you'll find more than plenty of passages about parents needing to discipline; train their children in the ways of the Lord; encourage, and not exasperate. But there aren't any passages about parents and their children being "besties."

Perhaps that is with good reason. To start, friend could simply be defined as a "preferred companion" or a "person with mutual interests and concerns." A friend is someone to shop till you drop with while you unload your burdens of the week. A friend is someone to catch the ball game with as you talk life, weather, and fantasy football. A friend is someone to pick you up with encouraging words during those late-night phone calls when you're struggling.

God intended for the relationship between parent and child to be much closer and more meaningful than shopping, fantasy football chats, or a few quality conversations. Rather, the relationship between parent and child is meant to be a mirror that reflects our relationship with God. When parents sacrificially

love, teach with patience, and discipline, they are reflecting how our Father in heaven deals with us. When children obey, honor, love, and respect, they are reflecting in part Jesus' perfect relationship with his Father and our intended relationship with God as his children here on earth.

Thus, parents and children are so much more than just friends. Sure, go shopping with your daughter and get an iced mocha latte. Rant and rave about fantasy football failures with your son. You're showing the care and interest that our Father shows to us. And go ahead and have meaningful conversations with your children about life. You're listening with love and communicating with compassion as our Father does to us. Yet at the same time, understand the high calling that goes beyond what looks like a friendship—the calling to discipline, teach, and train with a love that seeks nothing more than for your dear child to be with you and our heavenly Father forever in heaven.



Phil Huebner is campus pastor at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He and his wife, Becky, have a son and a daughter.

I HAVE HEARD people say that their child is their best friend. This seems like a harmless, sweet thing to say, but is it what the parent-child relationship is supposed to be? Can we be friends with our children and be good parents?

Of course, we treat our children with respect, enjoy spending time with them, and have genuine fun to-

gether. Does it end there? Friendships are a gift from God. We value that gift and recognize the tremendous blessing it can be, but the parent-child relationship goes beyond that of friendship. Psalm 127 speaks of the blessing of children, and Proverbs 22:6 reminds us to train our children in the way of the Lord. This is something bigger. It's connected to vocation and God's order for us. When we mix up God's order in our vocations, the outcomes are affected.

Parent-as-friend is not serving our children best. Though there is love, it may not always serve our children's best interests, out of fear of causing a rift. The vocation of a parent is a holy one. God calls parents to teach, train, and discipline children in his ways while also encouraging and loving them unconditionally, as he loves us.

Over the years, my husband and I have made many amazing memories with our three girls, had engaging conversations, and enjoyed relaxing movie nights. Now that they are older, there's a new kind of companionship and a love that has to let them be more independent. They come home from college or their apartment, we catch up, and it's fun. We share the highs and lows.

One thing has not changed through all the years of raising three talented and amazing girls: We love our relationship and companionship, but we are still their parents. I am their mom first. Even though they are adults (or *almost* there), I tell them that I'll never stop being their mom. Sometimes that means doing or saying the hard things, the right things. It means loving them fiercely and unconditionally. It means helping them pick up the pieces or learn from mistakes. It means I ask if they need groceries, or Mike asks, "How's money?"

The love we have for our girls and the relationship we foster, though friendlike at times, go beyond friendship. Our love is deep and wide, patterned after the love of our heavenly Father.

Let's view it in light of vocation. The role of a parent is quite different from the role of a friend. If you listed qualities or responsibilities of parents versus friends, I imagine the lists would look quite different. There's a reason for this. Parental love is different than friendship love. Parental love reflects the relationship we have with God our Father.

By grace, our God loves us with an *agape* love. It's a love that requires or expects nothing in return, a love so real and unconditional that he gave up everything for us. In Christ, God calls us sons and daughters, making us heirs to the riches of heaven. Do you not

love your children with that kind of love? Would you not sacrifice just about anything, perhaps your life, for them? That is the vocation of a parent. Though flawed by sin, the love of a parent is patterned after God's *agape* love for us.

The vocation of friend carries a different weight and responsibility. Friendship love is necessary, beautiful, and a blessing, but it is different. It is *philia* love or brotherly love. It's a love of similarities and requires reciprocity. This is a great love, but it pales in comparison to the *agape* love, the selfless, unconditional love the Father has for us.

Though flawed by sin, the love of a parent is patterned after God's *agape* love for us.

Agape love can be one-sided. *Agape* love has the best interest of the object of love at heart and is willing to be the bad guy at times for the good of that loved one. *Philia* is a mutual love. It's a shared commitment to care for and support one another. We are not meant to be our children's best friend, certainly not all the time. Our children need us to love them with an unwavering *agape* love, and God is using us to do it.

God made us his children through water and Word, and he treats us as such. He admonishes us when needed. He invites us to come to him for anything. He sees us for who we are, sin and all, yet forgives and loves us with a love that only a parent can. He does what is best for us, which isn't always what we want. He provides for every need. That's a parent kind of love.

It's a love that nurtures our children, as God nurtures us, with a balance of discipline and grace. This is the love of parents and children. It's a love that does what is best, even when it's hard. It's a love that helps and provides, though not earned or deserved. It's a gracious love, and it binds us together, as Christ's love binds us to him now and for eternity.

God has called parents to a tremendous and blessed role. He is faithful and upholds every promise, and he is with you, graciously loving your children through you.



Amanda Berg is the early childhood ministry director at Pilgrim, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin. She and her husband, Mike, have three daughters.



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